

A Bike tour from Ballard to Spokane -- inspiration and lessons learned.

Day 1:

Starting out at 4:10am from Ballard, finishing in Ellensburg around 7 pm, we traveled 130 miles, climbed a 3000 foot mountain pass, and rode around 25 or 30 miles on the freeway shoulder. The part that was new, and frankly quite scary was that on the east side of the summit there are drain grates on the side of the road that are about 3 feet long and 6 feet wide and they take up the entire right side of the shoulder leaving only 4 foot of space between the solid line of the edge of the lane where semi trucks are hurling past at 60+ mph and the bicycle...so we made heavy use of our rear view mirrors and braked accordingly to time our maneuvers so that we wouldn't get sucked off of our bikes by the wake of the trucks.

I would not even consider riding this section without a rear view mirror!

That was the scary part. The rest was quite nice. Once we got off of the freeway, it was peaceful, quiet (it is amazing how noisy freeways are...more on that later), and scenic.

Once we got into Ellensburg, I had a shower, got some dinner complete with practical joking entertainment between a couple of the other riders, and went to sleep.

Day 2:

When I got up at 6:30, to my surprise, I was able to move. I was even able to walk down the street to eat a stack of pancakes. After breakfast, Drew caught up with us and I traded my pannier of clothes for a gallon of water as we charged along the back roads from Ellensburg to Vantage. It reminded me a lot of the landscape around Jerome.

It was quiet enough that when I stopped pedaling, I couldn't hear any man-made noises. In that type of quiet, even when pedaling, it is amazing how far away you can hear cars.

After climbing what I would guess to be around another 800 feet or so above Ellensburg, we had a 10 mile descent into Vantage. The road was clean, the curves were mild, visibility was good, and the pavement was new with a chip/seal coat texture that gave great traction but would have left quite the road rash. I don't like road rash, so I was careful but my bike likes to fly with these new wheels and I did coast up to 43.5 mph.

For most of the grade, I coasted at an easy 30-35 mph.

For those who think I am insane, I did use my brakes, I checked my wheels and tires first, and I was constantly watching the road for problem rocks or debris, watching the road ahead for cars, watching the road behind in my mirror for cars, and the only traffic that we saw was one or two cars coming up the other direction.

We stopped at Vantage and I had Drew shuttle me across the Columbia. Mark, Jack and Bob walked their bikes across a 18" wide sidewalk on the I-90 bridge...I may be crazy, but I don't have a death wish!

At the bottom of the grade up I-90 from the Columbia gorge, I started pushing up the shoulder as cars and trucks rumbled by. The pavement was nice new smooth seal-coat and there was little road debris (unlike some of the other

roads we were on). I'm not sure on the exact time, but around 30 minutes later I was at the top and I pulled off and leaned the bike against a road sign to wait for the other guys.

So I said that freeways were noisy. Well, sitting on the side of the road, next to the road sign a good 10 feet away from the road bed, I could still feel the ground shake as semi-trucks pounded past.

After Jack, Bob, and Mark caught up to me we pulled off at the next exit and it started to rain. It rained off and on for the next 30 miles. We were hoping for a tail wind, but there was no wind at all. Between a few delays, and a flat tire, we were getting to Ritzville a little late so we pulled out the map and decided that a shortcut looked good.

Big mistake!

The "shortcut" was not only much longer, but it was full of rolling hills. I am glad I was prepared and had headlights and tail lights! The others didn't. We had a full moon, but two riders only had hand held flashlights (I am getting flashbacks of Melissa Anne telling me about her MBA class where they discussed mistakes in extreme environments) and formed a chain with Jack in the front with my spare headlight, Bob and Mark in the middle, and me in the rear with another headlight and a tail light. After an hour of riding in the dusk and an hour or two of riding in the dark, we called Drew for a lift. We were still about 10 miles out and it was all rolling hills.

Despite the relative danger, we could hear cars coming from 10+ miles away and we could see the glow of headlights on the horizon from miles away, and several people stopped to ask if we needed help, and we saw a herd of deer prancing along a field in the moonlight, and it was incredibly calm.

I was starting to get worried. We were low on energy, low on water, we still had miles of rolling hills to go and it was getting cold. The temperature differential between the hill tops and the valleys was easily 10 degrees and while we had rain jackets on to keep in some of the heat several of us only had shorts on and it was a mostly-clear sky so the heat was going quick.

So, at 9:45 pm, Drew shuttled us to the hotel after we had ridden 120 miles of what we had previously thought would be an easy 100 mile day with a tail wind pushing us along the flats at 25 mph.

A hot shower and a warm bed never felt better!

Day 3:

We slept in and started the ride at 9:30am.

Finally we had a good tail wind and the road flattened out as we followed railroad tracks for 30 or 40 miles through rocky sagebrush and grass land.

It was more beautiful riding with peace and quiet and enjoyable surroundings. We pulled into Sprague at 11:45am and had lunch at a cute local hangout. After lunch we had more flat, dry, quiet riding, a short freeway section, 30 miles of dry pine trees with sparse housing mixed in, some nice farmland, a stop at Medical Lake park, and then we went the long way around the Air Force base and down highway 2 into Spokane.

As we were cruising along near the Air Force base, a motorcyclist pulled up and kept pace with us for a minute and we compared the speeds that our

respective speedometers read. That was pretty cool. According to him, we were doing 25 mph and it didn't feel like we were working all that hard.

Day three ended around 6 pm with a final 80 miles or so for the day.

All in all, my legs feel a little better than they used to after the first hard day of downhill skiing of the season. They are a little sore and I felt some stiffness trying to set in when we got up after a celebratory meal, but I do think I could probably get up and do it all over again today.

After day 2, I was harboring thoughts of wimping out, but day three turned out to be quite beautiful and refreshing. I was thinking about using a flexcar to get around today, but why bother? I just did 330 miles, and climbed over a 3000 foot mountain pass! I might as well bicycle some more. :)

Lessons learned:

- 1) Don't plan on bicycling for anything more than 6 hours of optimal riding per day...bicycling in unfamiliar terrain at night isn't my idea of fun.
- 2) You can successfully draft off of a combine.
- 3) A domesticated cat can run at 13 mph.
- 4) I will go 30 miles out of my way or pay someone to drive me just to avoid walking a bicycle across the bridge at Vantage.
- 5) If it isn't hot out, a gallon of ice doesn't fully melt for 3 days.
- 6) Freeways are noisy, but as long as there aren't dangerous storm grates they aren't that bad. I can bicycle on the edge of the pavement and say about 12 feet away from traffic.
- 7) Always have someone nearby who can, like Drew did for us, bail you out when you do something stupid.

Once I recover, I should be available a little more now...well, until I start moving in mid-October to a condo that I am buying.

Take care and thanks to everyone for the support and prayers.

Mike